



Interview Summary: Mayor Jim Willett, Village of Coutts

Background

Mayor Jim Willett has been a resident of the Village of Coutts, Alberta since 2013. He has been a member of Council for five years and Mayor for four years.

Mayor Willett lives four blocks away from the Coutts border crossing, and three blocks away from the location of the actual protests. During the events of January and February 2022, he regularly visited the location of the protests to see what was happening, and he spoke to residents and protesters. He was regularly briefed by the RCMP on the ground and communicated with some provincial and federal officials.

Mayor Willett was interviewed by Natalia Rodriguez and Jean-Simon Schoenholz on September 6, 2022. Questions about this interview summary should be directed to Jean-Simon Schoenholz.

The Village of Coutts

The Village of Coutts is located in southern Alberta at the US/Canada border. Coutts does not have its own amenities aside from a convenience store, a restaurant, and a bank. Medical services, grocery stores, pharmacies, gas stations, and most other services are located 18 kilometers away in the town of Milk River.

The Village of Coutts is policed by provincial RCMP. There is a detachment of four or five RCMP officers in the town of Milk River that services the Village of Coutts.

Arrival of the Convoys and Blockade

On the afternoon of January 26, 2022, Mayor Willett saw a social media post promoting slow roll protests in Alberta. The plan, as he understood it, included having a convoy drive to the Coutts border crossing and turn around, doing a "slow roll". On January 27, 2022, about two days prior to the border blockade, he saw another social media post stating that there would be an attempt to block the border as part of the protests.

On January 24, 2022, a protest organizer called the Village's office to advise of the upcoming protest. The organizer indicated that the protest would not be blocking residents from entering or exiting Coutts.¹

Mayor Willett was concerned that Coutts would experience a blockade. This had occurred on November 7, 2021 when a long line of people crossing into the US ("Snowbirds") had

¹ COU00000249; COU00001283.



formed at the border crossing waiting for restrictions to be lifted. This line had blocked off access to the Village. Mayor Willett believed that a blockade would have a significant impact on the residents of Coutts.

On January 27, 2022, Mayor Willett wrote to the Solicitor General, Sonya Savage to advise her of the planned protest.² He got a call the next morning from a spokesperson in the Solicitor General's office who explained that the RCMP was aware of the situation and that he did not have anything to worry about.

On January 28, 2022, Mayor Willett addressed a letter to the residents of Coutts. It was meant to warn them of possible disruptions caused by protests and to provide general tips for staying safe.³

On January 29, 2022, the convoy drove up to the Coutts border crossing. Mayor Willett observed the RCMP escorting the convoy to the eventual location of the blockade, the intersection with highway 500, 1.3 km before the border crossing. Here, the convoy made a u-turn and returned back north up Highway 4, but about 45 minutes later, vehicles drove onto the median and ditches and blocked the road. He observed approximately six RCMP vehicles at the border that day. On February 1, 2022, an additional 42 RCMP vehicles arrived at the border establishing a large police presence in the area for the first time.

In Mayor Willett's view, the RCMP had planned for a slow roll protest but did not fully account for the blockade threats he had seen on social media. His view is that there was sufficient advance notice of a blockade attempt that the RCMP should have made a stronger show of force from the outset. The RCMP appeared caught off guard by the blockade.

Discussions with Protesters

Mayor Willett did not have any contact with protesters the first two or three days after their arrival. On February 3, 2022, Mayor Willett visited Smugglers Saloon and met with protesters. [Smugglers Saloon was a local pub that was used as a headquarters by protesters throughout the relevant time period.] He spoke with Alex Van Herk who indicated he was one of the protest leaders. During that meeting, Mayor Willett observed the protest group to be quite chaotic and without clear leadership. Mr. Van Herk told Mayor Willett that the protesters did not have a clear plan and that there was no clear leadership structure.

On February 4, 2022, Mayor Willett again attended Smugglers Saloon. While he was there, he met with a lawyer who was advising the protesters. Mayor Willett described the

² COU00000183.

³ COU00000001.



atmosphere at Smugglers Saloon during this second meeting as something similar to a “community meeting”. Many of the people at Smugglers Saloon at the time were Mennonites who had brought their wives and kids along with them. At the time, the blockade was allowing traffic to flow through a single lane. In that meeting, some of the protestors stated that – as a result of the continued traffic flow – they did not believe they were breaking the law but were informed otherwise by the lawyer.

Mayor Willett met with protestors a third time on February 5, 2022 when he went to Smugglers Saloon with Member of Parliament Glenn Motz and, Lorne Buis, Mayor of the Village of Foremost, Alberta.

According to Mayor Willett, each time he met with the protestors, it felt like they were waiting for something to happen.

At one point, early the evening of February 3, 2022, MLA Grant Hunter told Mayor Willett that he had negotiated a deal with protestors to open up one lane of traffic at the border. According to Mayor Willett, Artur Pawlowski, a pastor from Calgary, came to Coutts the same day and preached a sermon that strengthened the protestors’ resolve. As a result, the lane of traffic was open for only a few hours. After Mr. Pawlowski’s sermon, tractors came in and blocked traffic again.

Mayor Willett also spent some time communicating with Jory Evans, a protest organizer, primarily via Facebook.⁴ At one point, during a 30-minute face to face conversation, Mr. Evans agreed with him that the longer this type of protest went on, the more it would attract more extreme elements. In fact, Mr. Evans expressed to Mayor Willett that he was glad the RCMP had established a checkpoint at Milk River to prevent more extreme, anti-government protestors from going to Coutts. Mayor Willett confirmed that over time, more and more people arrived in Coutts who did not fit the “community meeting” feeling he had witnessed earlier at Smugglers Saloon.

Mayor Willett did not participate in any negotiations with protestors.

End of the Blockade

Mayor Willett was advised by Jory Evans that after the RCMP’s raid on February 14, 2022, protestors had met at Smugglers Saloon and decided to bring the blockade to an end. There were rumors that the *Emergencies Act* would be invoked, that bank accounts would be frozen, insurance coverage would be lost, and participants would be unable to cross into the US. The arrests on February 14th were “the straw that broke the camel’s back”. This is when they realized that the potential consequences to their actions were becoming serious.

⁴ COU00000012.



There was heavy police presence in Coutts for another two to three weeks. Some protesters continued to use the protest site made available by the RCMP in Milk River for quite some time.

Relationship with RCMP

Throughout the blockade, Mayor Willett was invited to attend and did in fact attend RCMP situational briefings in person on two occasions and once virtually.

RCMP officers also attended a public Village Council meeting on February 8, 2022 to address a number of concerns from Council members and to explain the RCMP's response. This included the way the RCMP was monitoring traffic coming into Coutts (discussed below), as some members of Council were concerned about privacy. Council were told by the RCMP that its response amounted to “building the airplane while you're flying it”, which he understood to mean that the response had to adapt to new elements all the time. The RCMP attended two subsequent Council meetings on March 8, 2022 and again on May 10, 2022. During the March 8, 2022 meeting, Staff Sergeant Chris Zanidean and Corporal Mike Brown attended, along with MP Glen Motz as Village Council reviewed the events that had transpired and they answered questions from council and citizens. During the May 10, 2022 meeting, Staff Sergeant Zanidean and Superintendent Rick Jane attended to address continuing concerns some on Council had about privacy issues at checkpoints during the events of February 2022.

On February 4, 2022, the RCMP requested a copy of certain Coutts bylaws. These were provided to the RCMP by the Village administrator.⁵ Mayor Willett understands that the RCMP was trying to find additional ways to discourage protesters from continuing.

Engagement with Federal and Provincial Officials

Mayor Willett did not make any request for assistance from the province of Alberta.

Mayor Willett was in regular communication by phone and text message with Rajan Sawhney, Minister of Transport.⁶ Mayor Willett explained that she wanted to come to Coutts but that she told him the “boss won't clear it”. He understood this to be a reference to Premier Kenney. Minister Sawhney did not explain why she was not permitted to visit Coutts.

Mayor Willett did not hear from Ric McIver, Minister of Municipal Affairs, at any point during the events of January and February 2022 or afterwards.

⁵ COU00000812 – 816; COU00001428; COU00001433.

⁶ COU00000016.



On February 4, 2022, Mayor Willett had a call with Premier Kenney.⁷ The conversation generally related to the federal Government's imposition of vaccination requirements for truckers and the pandemic. The Premier attributed much of the health system's problems at the time to a lack of surge capacity. Mayor Willett does not recall having any discussion about provincial legislation. There was no specific offer or request for support.

MLA Grant Hunter visited Coutts and met with protesters several times, but he was not there representing the provincial Government in an official capacity. MLA Drew Barnes and MLA Shane Getson were also there but not in an official capacity, and did not meet with the Mayor.

On February 2, 2022, Mayor Willett had a virtual meeting with Randy Boissonnault, Minister of Tourism, for reasons unrelated to the protests. Minister Boissonnault suggested his coming to visit Coutts to assist but this did not materialize. This was Mayor Willett's only engagement with a federal official.

Overall, Mayor Willett says he did not receive the type of support he expected from provincial and federal governments. In particular, he expected the provincial government to make better use of the *Critical Infrastructure Defence Act*, which he understood to be meant to avoid this very type of situation.

Invocation of the *Emergencies Act*

Mayor Willett did not have discussions regarding the invocation of the *Emergencies Act* with provincial or federal officials, RCMP, or protesters.

Impact on Residents

Most of the Village's population is elderly. Many residents found it intimidating to have to go through the protest area to travel to Milk River to access essential services. Protesters were managing traffic flow through the protest area and, most of the time, they were cooperative in ensuring access by residents to the highway to Milk River. At times, however, residents had to drive off road and into the ditch to get around protesters. He is aware that several elderly residents were very frightened when forced to go through the protest area or simply stayed home.

Mayor Willett is aware of one resident, a veteran who suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder (**PTSD**), who had to leave town during the protests as it triggered her PTSD.

During the first few days, the local school bus did not run as the bus driver was unwilling to make the trip through the protest area. Similarly, courier services were occasionally

⁷ COU00000586.



unable to cross the protest area to enter the Village. At least one local business, which ships cattle, was unable to operate during the blockade.

Once the RCMP established checkpoints to enter Coutts, its officers began regulating entry into the Village. There was a police presence at the intersection of every road. There was no way to drive into Coutts without going through a police checkpoint. Some RCMP officers checked identification to make sure only local residents were entering, some took photos of drivers' licenses. This lasted about a week and a half. Police presence on rural roads continued for another week and was gradually scaled back over the course of an additional week. At least one RCMP officer told Mayor Willett that they were treating Coutts as a "crime scene" and so they were closing the roads as a result.

The blockade greatly disrupted everyday life in Coutts. Mayor Willett also observed that the Village of Coutts has become more polarized as a result of the protests.

Threats Against Public Officials

Mayor Willett received one death threat during the relevant time period. He understood it to be related to the protest activity. He received a few other threatening phone calls and at one point he found a truck parked outside of his home taking photos. He brought this to the RCMP's attention.